Meili's Ultimate Needlework Project

Story: Meili's Ultimate Needlework Project
Storylink: https://archiveofourown.org/works/46027258
Category: Re:ゼロから始める異世界生活 | Re:Zero Starting Life in Another World (Anime)
Genre: F/M, Gen
Author: Marquess
Authorlink: https://archiveofourown.org/users/Marquess
Last updated: 03/26/2023
Words: 0
Rating: General Audiences
Status: Complete
Content: Chapter 1 to 1 of 1 chapters
Source: ArchiveOfOurOwn.org

Summary: Julius' eyebrows draw together as he pinches the bridge of his nose. "Dame Elsa and Sir Subaru's… methods… are peculiar, and perhaps the Royal Knight Order isn't the best fit for them. I solely wish for you to give it some thought before you submit the final report to Captain Gildark." Reinhard blinks. "I do not understand." "You mentioned they killed the Archbishop of Wrath with a falconet." Reinhard nods. It was the most logical choice— they were on the move and a bigger cannon couldn't be carried across irregular terrain. "It was very efficient. An instakill." When The Archbishop of Lust dies a tragic death, Reinhard picks a few strays, Meili gets a new set of dolls, Elsa discovers killing is legal if you are a knight, and Shaula re-encounters with her old Master.

Chapter 1: Meili's Ultimate Needlework Project

Meili curls closer to her dearest mabeast, Lowenchen, and lets his purring lull her to sleep.

Lowenchen is fluffy and warm and has huuuge teeth, bigger than any Guiltylowe Meili has ever seen, and she knows it wouldn't let anything happen to her while Mama is away on business— Meili wasn't meant to overhear but they went all the way to this place so that she can gather information on the Baron so he can die, and Mama must never know that she eavesdropped.

Meili doesn't want to be turned into flies.

But it's okay, Lowenchen won't tell. He's strong, and he's Meili's best friend, second only to her Big Sister. It's been quite a while since Mama left her at the foot of the oak tree, though— and it's so boring to stay put without anything to do that Meili keeps tapping her feet on the ground.

She slipped two dolls in her satchel before they set off, though. Her favorites. Elsa sewed them for her— she's not very good at it, but they're soft and squishy and Meili loves them, so, soo much. One is Big Sis Elsa, and the other is the man she always speaks about— a very, veeery strong knight, but Meili has never met him.

She's not sure who he is or why Elsa likes him so much, only knows that he's strong, has red hair and blue eyes, but she can play with him anyway. He can be the knight of *The Tale of the Cursed Pike-Maiden* , and of course her Big Sis doll is gonna be the maiden, cursed by a scary witch.

A thud comes from her right and makes her tense up.

Lowenchen grumbles, and lifts his horned head from the ground to scan their surroundings. It doesn't look like something bad is around, but if he heard it too, it's better to be safe— Meili clasps her fingers around the hilt of the knife on her belt and holds her breath, then hugs her Big Sister doll tight with her other arm.

With a lurch, Lowenchen snaps its jaw around a— bird, then swallows it down, and just like that, a spray of drool splatters on the grass with a hiss. Smoke rises where it lands. Wha— oh, right. Mama said Lowenchen was bad and not useful enough, and changed him a bit, but not in a way that she could see— she made him faster and made it so that it could spit acid.

Meili scrunches her nose and makes a face as she puts the knife away. It really stinks— kinda like burnt hair, but also like rotten eggs. She doesn't like it.

When a golden feather from the bird falls next to her on the ground, she picks it up. It's really, really pretty. The color is the same as Mama's hair, too.

A shadow from a cloud moves across her, so Meili shivers and huddles closer to Lowenchen. She is breathless for a few moments— It shouldn't be this cold around midday— maybe a snowstorm is coming. She glances up. Nope, not a cloud on sight and the sun is pretty bright, too. That's sooo weird. But nobody came close to her, and the sunlight makes it warm and nice, so she shrugs and picks up her dolls again.

It's been forever since she and Elsa got to play, that's so unfair—! Playing alone isn't the same *at all* , but it's better than nothing— and the knight needs to save the Pike-Maiden from the curse before it's too late. Meili tips him until his face presses up against the other dolls, and beams. The dolls do anything that she tells them to, and true love's kiss can break any curse—! She heard it once while eavesdropping on a target, as they put their children to bed.

They had a nice book with *a lot* of colored illustrations, but Meili didn't get to keep it.

"Meili, it's time to stop by the inn."

Oh. Never mind, Big Sis is already done, and best of all, Mama isn't there with her yet, so maybe they can go play for a few minutes if she still isn't finished after their next task. And maybe Meili can ask her to make a new doll, too if they stay around here for a few days.

Meili brushes her dress clean from dust and runs up to Elsa. Lowenchen can watch her stuff, since he cannot come.

Under the tree's shade, the doll knight's blue eyes soften, gentle and confused and not very doll-like at all, while the other's smile sharpens to a knife's edge.

"I don't want to consider this a second chance, not really."

Julius's words drown in the ambiance of the pub, with so many customers clinking their glasses for a toast or slamming them onto their tables, and laughter filling the air, but Reinhard's Divine Protections don't allow it to be a significant impediment— he could hear the words as clear as a bell.

For such was Od Laguna's will.

Julius stared at him, eyes bright with relentless determination and five mugs worth of fortified black wine. "We couldn't save the Royal Family, and we cannot ever hope to make up for that failure, but we can save the Kingdom. We can protect what's left of it."

Not a chance to make right what once went wrong, but an opportunity to look at the future, and accomplish one last task in memory of the Lugunican Royal Family. His memory conjures for him a picture of His Highness the Fourth Prince's beaming smile, and Reinhard's own lips upturn at the corners— but the sadness of what could have been doesn't allow him to put his heart in it.

—then he stiffens. His vision swims for a second, as the light hits the wine in his mug.

An opportunity to not fail the Kingdom a second time, an opportunity to— to do what? Of course. To not fail the citizens of Lugunica. And he, too, is a citizen, isn't he? He should be allowed to save himself, to find happiness somewhere— perhaps not here, perhaps… perhaps in the north. Reinhard pauses. But no, this is unlike him. Where does such a thought come from?

He won't permit a selfish impulse to make his resolve waver, the Kingdom is far more important than his happiness, far more important than any single individual's life and will— His head dips to his chest and he blinks. What was he thinking about again? He cannot quite recall it, how unusual. Reinhard strokes his thumb on the rim of the white mug in his hands— white, like snow, wine black like the forests when the light dims in Gusteko and the winter becomes king. He'd love to contemplate the desolate beauty of such a view. The heaviest snowfalls come during this month, but this isn't an issue for him.

"Reinhard?" Julius sets down his mug, then leans towards him. His eyes, Reinhard notices, are golden, like the moon on a wintry landscape. "Are you well?"

He frowns. No, he isn't. He hasn't been alright in a long, long time, ever since Father turned his back on him; he hasn't been alright ever since he killed his honored Grandmother— no, earlier still. Reinhard hasn't been alright since Mother has been trapped in that cursed, eternal slumber.

"No, I don't think I am—" Reinhard never thought he would utter the truth aloud, yet why wouldn't he? Julius is a dear friend, and one of the few candlelights brightening his life. Indeed, if anyone could understand this newfound devotion for big chested brunettes, it would be him. Yes, Julius will understand him.

Reinhard pushes the chair back and stands. It's time. He needs to go, now.

"Julius, my deepest regrets, but I shall go rogue now— I cannot stay in Lugunica any longer. Please scream for me should you ever be in need of any assistance. I will hear you."

"Wha— Reinhard, what are you talking about?" Julius' mug drops from his hands, and would have spilled wine everywhere, had Reinhard's hand not shot out to catch it before the fall. Reinhard places it back on the table, away from the edge.

"Stop—! Where are you going?!" Julius' hand closes around his forearm, but it's no use.

Reinhard is the strongest man in the world, and this much cannot hope to hinder him on his way to the exit.

Regardless, Julius deserves an answer. He is a friend.

“I am going to Gusteko,” Reinhard turns back, and pries Julius’ fingers off his arm one by one. “The love of my life is waiting for me.”

The snow crunches and her boots sink a good four inches at every step, but Meili stomps forward. It isn't that she doesn't like it here— they have warm beds and food. And she really, reaaally loves *that* . But it's sooo boring here. She cannot bring Lowenchen in the cabin, and has been playing with her dolls for ages already, so there’s nothing left to do.

Meili lets herself drop into the snow under the oak tree— at least from there she's gonna see her sister the exact moment she's back from scouting.

“A child…?”

Meili stifles a shriek with a hand, scrambles into a standing position and then whirls around to look around at who had spoken, only to meet the vibrant blue eyes of someone that absolutely isn’t her sister. A man with red, crimson hair and a white coat stares back at her, just as confused as she is.

Very familiar crimson hair.

She gasps, eyes widening in recognition. “It’s Mister Knight-Doll!”

Elsa loved all bowels, but in the last few days, Mister Knight-Doll’s bowels seemed to be the only bowels her sister wanted to talk about. Meili was okay with that though. She really was. Because even if she found so, so boring how Elsa kept repeating that they were red and soft and squishy and *oh so pretty* — it gave Elsa a reason to play with her every day, and nothing made Meili happier than that.

“Elsa will love this,” Mister Knight-Doll tilts his head and raises his eyebrows. Meili unbuttons her winter coat to show him the doll. Tied to her belt, now open to the world to see, hangs a little Reinhard plush by the neck. Her dress has no pockets, but Elsa helped her make some ropes to hang her favorite toys. “We did it together.” She explains after a short pause.

Mister strokes his throat with his thumb and a pinched expression.

Meili blinks. Wow. She truly owed her sister an apology. She knew Elsa was the smartest, strongest and prettiest, but Meili had never realized her sister improved so much at sewing. Even though her toy was only a rag doll, Elsa had managed to capture his empty eyes and gloomy aesthetics perfectly. None of the dolls from their former victims were this accurate.

“Elsa said that you had the reddest bowels in the world,” She explains, taking her Elsa plush out too and buttoning her coat again. It even had small, knitted blades. “She has been asking Mama for a job in Lugunica for yeears now, just so she can get a chance to see them.”

His hand rests on the hilt of his sword. “Is that so…? Must I assume your sister is the reason you have summoned me here?”

Meili cocks her head in confusion. “Summon you? What is Mister talking about?”

She never summoned anything other than mabeasts— and surely, Mama would have told her if the Sword Saint was a humanoid mabeast such as the ones in Gusteko’s old fairy tales. Meili squints at him. He was definitely pretty enough to be one, and his hair looked inhuman enough, with a fiery red shade, but…

“You didn’t do it on purpose...”

“—Do what on purpose?” She blinks, feigning innocence. Right. Mister is a Knight, so he is probably searching for Elsa because of one of their older missions.

Still— Meili eyes Mister from head to toe. No matter what her sister said, he doesn’t look like much of a big deal;

many of Elsa and her victims have been bigger men. Even if he *is* the real life version of Knight-Doll.

The knight takes a step towards her before dropping to one knee. Oh. Meili takes a step back– the snow doesn't melt where his body touches the ground– that's so odd. And up close, he looks even prettier, like a spirit.

"My name is Reinhard van Astrea," he says, breaking Meili out of her daze. "I came here to take you to Lugunica."

She stiffens. Just like that— his face contorts into a horrible thing in her eyes.

"No thanks," Meili hisses.

Summoning Lowenchen, she cowers away, putting as much distance from him as she can with only a few steps. The snow and wind would make it harder to track Sister, but he still should be able to reach her. With that in mind, she twirls a lock of her hair with a finger and shakes her head. "You see~ my sister says I shouldn't wander alone with strangers."

"Your sister sounds very wise." Mister's voice raises slightly. A gust of wind. "Is she your primary caretaker?"

"Elsa gives me food, carries me on her shoulders when I'm tired, and makes plushies with me." Her older sister truly is the most amazing person in Gusteko and the entire world.

"I understand." He nods, apologetic. She takes another step back. "It's reassuring to learn you had such a beautiful bond in your life. But you have been given a gift by Od Laguna, and you must be taught how to wield it properly."

Oh no . Meili goes pale. Elsa and her always made sure to kill anyone that discovered her ability. It was the one order Mama gave that they both followed at all costs.

She is going to get killed for this.

"—I have a similar ability, and I misused it greatly when I was younger."

"—You can control them too?!" The words escape Meili before her brain can catch up with her mouth. Another person that was able to control *mabeasts* — Meili had always wanted to meet someone like her. No wonder Elsa loved Mister's bowels so much.

He nods again as her fear vanishes. "The ability to control people is dangerous. That's why I want to teach you how to use your power correctly, so you don't make the same mistakes that I did."

Meili claps her hands and giggles. He liked mabeasts so much he thought of them as people. Mister was so funny. "It's not dangerous at all Sir Knight-Doll, Meili isn't foolish enough to let them *bite* her."

He scrunches his eyebrows up, but Meili barely notices it. A *teacher* — Elsa had an actual teacher and she became the best assassin in Gusteko. "But only using them for curses and munching people's heads off is boring. I want to learn more ways to kill!"

"...No, not how to kill. Just how to control your powers. And after you grow up, you can decide if you want to become a knight or not use them at all."

As if she would refrain from using her powers— not using her abilities at all sounded terribly boring.

Before she could reply, a familiar blade cuts the air right between them, and the Sword Saint leaps away right as the weapon brushes against his ribs and arm and fails to pierce his heart.

The short blade lands a couple of inches away from Mister's feet, and he wastes no time. He picks it up, ignoring his own sword.

Elsa leaps down from a tree and lunges at him in a blur. As steel runs across steel with a screech, they both stiffen, a look of surprise and confusion flashing across their faces.

—And then, as if a magic spell just broke, Mister kicks Sister in the stomach, and Elsa crashes into a tree on the other side of the clearing.

Elsa's head crushes against the trunk and turns it into nothing but splinters, but the impact doesn't deter Sister— of course it doesn't. Her Curse-Doll ability heals aaall her wounds, so a second later, Elsa raises to her feet with a grin,

and licks a smear of blood off the corner of her mouth. “My, My…that wasn’t very gentlemanly.”

Mister’s frown deepens. “Black hair, and a pair of twin blades. You are the Bowel Hunter.” Something Meili doesn’t quite recognize laces his words. “It’s over, the magic is gone. She wasn’t lying when I talked to her— did you manipulate your own sister to bring me here without her knowledge?”

"I honestly do not know what you are talking about, for I did not do such a thing,” She replies, curling a lock of her hair with a long, thin finger. “But if I had known it was an option, I would have done so years ago.”

As Elsa races towards him again, blade aimed to his guts, Meili gasps. This was bad. If Elsa killed Mister, then Mister wouldn’t be able to help her learn how to murder people better using her power. No. She has to stop her sister. Elsa can’t debowel Meili’s human Knight-Doll yet! Her hold on the plushies tightens—

Mister’s eyebrows twitch, and his right hand moves to his neck.

…towards the same exact stop Meili was grabbing his doll.

Alarmed, Meili eyes the plush.

“—I’m disappointed I didn’t get to see your famous sword,” Elsa licks her knife ominously. “Just your bowels will have to be enough.”

Meili scoffs, she isn’t a baby, so she knows her sister hadn’t meant his fancy legendary sword—! Before Sister can reach the still slowed down Mister, Meili crashes both her dolls towards the snow covered ground.

“Sister! Mister offered to help me learn how to control mabeasts better, you can’t just…” Meili gapes and trails off mid whine. Both Elsa and Mister dropped to the ground at the same moment the dolls did. “…kill him,” she mouths, breathless.

Mister gives her a worried look– then his gaze trails down at the toys in her hands.

It hadn’t been her imagination. Mister and Elsa were mimicking them.

“Meili—”

She ignores her sister and focuses on Mister, whose expression had shifted into one of surprise. Her grip tightens on the doll. “We… Mama could arrive at any moment…so—”

“—Dead people cannot learn stuff either, Meili,” Elsa hisses.

Meili stops. Why did Sister—? Oh. *Oh* .

In her excitement to find herself a Teacher she forgot a very important detail—Mama told Meili that she couldn’t mention her existence even if they got caught. Mama said she would find out if they did and Mama never lies. Meili shivers. Her hold over the dolls loosens up. Mama was immortal. Standing against the Archbishop of Lust was senseless. Meili, just like every other filthy peasant, is nothing but a meatbag, soon to be turned into flies.

She wants Mister to live enough to teach her, but there would be no point if Mama killed her.

Mentioning「Mother」is a mistake she can’t take back

Lowenchen growls from a bush behind Mister.

“—An Archbishop? The Archbishop of Lust is on her way to this forest?" Mister Knight-Doll takes a sharp breath, much paler than his plush counterpart ever did. Meili freezes and meets Mister's sky blue eyes with her own. “I see. Her presence makes the situation more complicated than I anticipated, but not necessarily worse.”

She shakes her head. Mister truly was naive, unaware of Mama’s power. With a swift move of her hand, she motions Lowenchen to attack—

—but her mabeast doesn’t move. Instead, Lowenchen keeps purring behind the bush, indifferent to the fight and to the smell of blood.

“Eh?” Meili wheezes. A cold sensation creeps through her chest, as painful as an ice-burn, though whether it is from the snow or the panic still coursing through her veins, she doesn’t know. None of her mabeasts had refused to move

before.

“—My apologies, for I will have to overstay my welcome. My intention was to return to Lugunica immediately after finding you, but I simply cannot do that knowing that an Archbishop of the Witch Cult plans to head over here."

“And if you would allow me,” Mister smiles down at her. “I am sure we can figure out a couple of plans to defeat her.”

How can he be strong enough to defeat Mama? Meili looks down at the doll. Big Sis said he’s the strongest man in the world, sure, but Mama might be stronger— she’s a woman, and Big Sis never said that he’s the strongest *person* in the world. But when she opens her mouth to ask, Mister already started to walk back towards the cabin, and as Elsa’s lips turn downwards into a murderous frown, Meili realizes she couldn’t remember mentioning Mama’s title out loud.

“Mister Knight-Doll…” Meili’s eyebrows climb up her forehead as she examines the materials scattered over the low table: a dozen scraps of fabric in a few shades of tan and red; a handful of crimson buttons, sizes mismatched; and several bundles of threads in yellow hues. “I don’t think any of these is pretty enough to be Mama’s hair.”

Mama’s golden locks are smooth and shiny. The opposite of anything Mister brought her.

“I’m sorry,” he sighs, and his eyebrows press together, mouth downturned, until his expression is the same as Lowenchen’s is when scolded. “There is no excuse for my failure. I searched through the entire region and couldn’t find any animal with a golden fur that fit the given description.”

“It’s okay,” Meili reaches out her hand and pets him softly in the head, just as she would with Lowenchen. Mister Knight-Doll’s eyes widen in surprise. “I’m sure you tried your best.”

“I might need to extend my search area if we want to find the correct materials. I have been thinking about it, and the shade you described reminds me of Lugunica’s royal colors. If I were to return to the Capital for a couple of minutes, I should be able to gather the—”

“Wait—no, you don’t need to do that,” Elsa’s lips part as her eyes grow large and dark and liquid. Meili didn’t know her eyes could do that. “Meili can just use the first thread you brought and be done with it. Even if it fails, she can show it to Mama and say it’s because she missed her.”

“If Mama saw we made a pus-haired ragdoll with her face, she would turn us into flies.” She shudders. “And— I’m not stupid, sister. I know you only say this because you want him to stay so you can gut him. Again.”

Elsa puts a hand on her chest, giving the fakest heartbroken expression Meili has ever seen. “I would never. Why would you say something so mean to your dearest sister?”

“—I can buy the correct materials and return on the same day. I’m still nothing but a guest that showed himself uninvited. If giving up my bowels is what I need to make Miss Elsa ignore my lack of etiquette, then I shall do so,” Mister replies, hands on his chin.

“You truly are perfect,” Elsa’s knife-like smile sharpens to a delighted edge, and she stands from the couch to wind her arms around Mister’s waist. She rests her chin on his shoulders and leans forward so that she can look down at his stomach. It’s just Elsa to think about that instead. Meili pouts. The doll is reeally important–! “A divine protection of unlimited bowels. Truly blessed.”

“Mister, even if you can regrow them, letting someone play with your insides is downright creepy.”

Mister opens his mouth to reply— and Meili is *suuure* there is a slight blush on his cheeks— but instead of his voice, an explosion shatters the moment. Her ears ring. In the span of a second, her surroundings shift from dark brown to spotless white, and drop her flat into the bone freezing snow as the cabin she had grown so fond of becomes nothing but splinters. Meili gasps. “Where—?”

“—Where is that bitch that wasted my time by not being where she was supposed to be?” Spoke a white haired man, clad in a witch cultist uniform and standing only meters away from them.

“...Well, this is boring,” Meili lays down in a blanket of snow, eyes fixed on the sky. The cloud above them is white and fluffy and bunny-shaped. It’s rather cute– a wisp on the head could even pass for a horn. “Are you sure that’s the Archbishop of Greed? I thought he was supposed to be strong.”

Mister Knight-Doll said that they needed to stay safe and away from the battle, but the explosions and the Archbishop’s curses allow them to guess what’s happening even from hundreds of feet away.

“Untie me and I will make the fight more entertaining,” Elsa snaps, and pulls at the pus-colored threads Mister used to tie her to the tree until blood stains them. Meili definitely cannot use them now, the color fits even less now!

She squints. “If I did that, Mister would just tie you again and say you shouldn’t join. Like he did the last four times I helped you.”

Elsa growls. And only then, Meili realizes she couldn’t hear the battle anymore.

“Huh?” She stands up, and looks around. Is it really done? “Did Mister just have to kill him many times for him to stay dead?” He stopped screaming from one second to the other.

Now the sounds of the snow-covered forests came back– but only for a second, because the birds fall silent right as Meili steps toward the treeline, where the ground is higher. The brambles at the feet of the trees shake as something else approaches.

“—Lowenchen?!” Meili blurts out. He shakes leaves and twigs off himself, blood dripping from his mouth, and rubs his snout against the ground with a whine. Meili squints and pulls up his upper lip with her index finger, careful to not come into contact with his drool. Not again–! Lots and lots of long, half-burnt human hair is stuck between his fangs and his gums. Icky. And from the colors, it looks like it's from different people– as if Lowenchen ate almost one hundred women. Oh no. Did Lowenchen eat a whole village again?! “What did I say about eating weird stuff in the forest?! Just how many things did you eat?”

Wait. The hair–! Meili takes a sharp breath, eyes widening.

She stands up and sprints towards the remnants of the cabin, then starts digging with her hands and nails in the spot where her bed was supposed to be. Ouch. After a few minutes, she catches sight of a small bag.

“Yes—!” Lowenchen tilts his head with a confused whine at the sound of her voice, as Meili pulls a shiny golden feather from inside it, the exact shade of Mama's hair. “I have the perfect thing to make a Mama Doll—”

Why didn’t she think of it sooner?

“—And then, Mister Knight-Doll returned and told us that the reason he didn’t want Elsa to fight the weird little man was because murder is only legal if you are a knight!”

Meili takes her cocoa cup farther away from her mouth as she gives a delighted giggle. Mister’s staff has already reminded her twice that being careless with food is impolite— and she really, reaaally doesn’t want to anger the people that make her meals. “Mama never told us that! So, because we only have experience with killing, Elsa and I decided to join the Royal Knights!”

“...I see,” Carol Remedies replies after a short pause, eyes wide.

Mister’s maid is really weird— always looking on the verge of a panic attack, but Meili adores her already. She is kind and pretty, a lot like Mister’s purple-haired friend, too. Meili should make a doll with their faces just to make sure nothing bad happens to them— after all, Sister said nice people were the first to die. Yes, she should absolutely do that.

This place is *awesome* .

Subaru cannot help but smile— a fantasy world, with demi-humans and adventurers, just like a video game. Or a light novel—! And there might be magic too, here. It means things are looking up. He would never have gotten a fresh start back home, so it's more than he could ever ask for, and if this is anything like a video game, he might get his very own special skill too—!

Subaru startles as his shoulder bumps into a stranger, so he looks up and blinks. Oops. He got distracted— and yeah, okay, that's just like him, fantasy world or not. Anyway, he should try and find an adventurer guild, this place gotta have one of those—

"Hold up—!" The guy he stumbles on scowls at him. He's— big. Yup. "Where ya think you're going?"

"Huh?"

"We're saying you aren't going anywhere—" The smallest of the three points at him.

"—And ya better give us whatever you have on you." The third guy shifts to block his path right as he says that.

Great. This better not be how the tutorial starts, because then Subaru would need to say a few words to whoever designed it. Robbers on the first day in an isekai story? Come on, that's such a cliché. His first adventure deserves so much better than that— at least a beautiful girl should appear before him and scare those guys away. Every fantasy story needs a female lead.

"No way. I'm not gonna be the guy who gets robbed on his first day, what the hell."

"Do you think you can talk back just like that–"

"We should just kill him, that'll teach 'im to shut up for good–"

"My, my, what is happening here?" A woman's voice calls out from the alley's entrance.

Subaru turns.

Wow. That's definitely female lead material, so maybe whoever thought up this place isn't so bad— the woman has the biggest chest that Subaru has ever seen, striking dark hair, and it's hard to tell anything else because uh, yeah, he *really* shouldn't stare right *there* and make a terrible first impression. So her white cloak it is— it flutters in the breeze, and it must be a uniform since the crest and everything about it looks official.

The three morons take a step back.

The small guy squeals. "Larkins, what should we—"

"Shut it. Wait, wait—! He threatened us. We were just passin' through–" Larkins holds up his hands, eyes wide and fixed on the woman's face.

Huh. Her smile must be great to get people to leave her alone, it's kind of creepy how it stretches side to side like that — wait. What.

"I did what now?" Subaru's smile falls, and he scowls.

"Those who wear a white uniform need to keep the peace within the city walls— and to get rid of any disturbance they meet on patrol." She recites. Her eyes narrow, but the smile doesn't waver. The thugs take another step away from her. Then another.

Without another word, they turn and start running.

"Wait, you can't really–! Come on, these guys were lyin–"

Subaru yelps, because the woman is now two inches from him, and he didn't hear her get close at all, and also

because there should be some rule on personal space even in a fantasy world– but at least it becomes much easier to look at her in the face, because every hair on his body stands up now and he's rooted to the spot.

"Lying or not, you four caused a disturbance and someone needs to be responsible–"

Two knives with long, curved edges gleam in her hands, and Subaru shivers. He's never seen a real weapon this close, and it's time to follow those guys' example, isn't it, if he just could move– a flick of her wrist makes him flinch. The pain doesn't hit until seconds later– and when Subaru looks down, he finds that one of the knives sank into his abdomen to the hilt.

Blood fills his mouth.

"What–"

"–And it is always my pleasure to do my duty as a knight."

Subaru coughs, and red drips from his lips before the woman slices down across his belly, then pulls the blade free with a twist of her hand.

"I shouldn't let this go on– Reinhard wouldn't be happy if I let you suffer too much. Or should he find out because I took too long." Her hand raises high above her head, with the end of the knife pointed at him. This– isn't good.

Stab .

#05

"Come on, can we talk about this–"

Stab .

#11

"Just take another look at those guys, they're obviously–"

Stab .

#16

"At least give me a minute to explain–!"

Stab .

#33

“Wait, wait, wait–!”

Stab .

#42

“Please?”

Stab .

#48

“–You fucking bitch, I hope they fire you.”

Stab .

#69

“Fuck you. I’ve seen better boobs, anyway.”

Stab .

#72

“Yup, I guess you’re not running this time. That’s too bad.”

Subaru sits back, wipes his hand clean from the blood on Larkins' back, then pats his shoulder when his head lolls to the side, lifeless. He kicks away something that lays at his feet —a spleen?— and, well, he might have been a bit too hard with the smallest guy, because his ribs stick out now, jagged and pale. Whatever. The important thing is, the whole length of the other two's intestines stretches from side to side of the alley several times– that's a lot of garbage. It's what, over ten feet for each? Something like that. That bitch better appreciate it.

Subaru scrunches his nose with a grimace. Man, this is really messy. And gross. Like, really, really gross. But now he kinda gets why Elsa is so eager to gut him every fucking time. It's kinda fun, like kneading bread, if you could knead with a broken bottle shard and if you were meant to stab the dough until it deflated, instead of working it so it can rise nice and fluffy for the oven.

Eh, the metaphor needs some work too, but who cares. Those three morons sure can't now.

Subaru feels calmer now– no, scratch that, he feels zen. Maybe he should do this more often.

Elsa blinks down at him.

" –Surprise?"

"Only those with a white cloak are allowed to gut criminals while still being on the side of justice."

"Oh, come fucking on, you were meant to like this–!"

Stab.

#89

Subaru steps away from her until his back hits the wall. He winces. He's fucking sick of this fucking time loop, and this bitch doesn't even let him finish talking half the time. If he gets out of this, he's gonna find a way to turn her into a splatter on the wall, even if it takes a thousand more tries. "There must be something you want–! Listen, I can play the guitar– wait, you don't that here maybe, uh, I can do knit, I can do tricks with coins–"

Elsa unsheathes one of her knives.

"Hold on, wait– I can make dolls, too!"

Her hand stops in midair. "Dolls?"

"I'm great at sewing– can make clothes too. But I'm much better with dolls–"

Elsa pauses. "Those who wear white cloaks are allowed to reduce the punishment to community service, in special cases."

"–I fucking knew it, you only did all that because you enjoy it, you f–!"

Her eyes narrow at him, so his mouth shuts without any input from his brain, and, well, the most important thing right now is to get out of this.

Elsa twirls her knife between her fingers, eyebrows drawn together in thought. "My little sister loves dolls. I haven't had time to make her any new ones."

Finally. Subaru takes a deep breath, cards a hand through his hair. Okay, good. He can fucking do this. Once he's past this, all he needs is a plan. Or ten. "Well,okay, I will make all the dolls you want, if you just put that away."

Or a hundred. But who cares? He got all the time in the world to succeed.

Elsa sheathes her knife.

“–And that’s why I’m here. I didn’t expect you to not have any decent materials.” Big Brother picks a flaxen thread from the other side of the table, knocking off a pair of scissors in the process, and holds it between thumb and forefinger. It’s worn-out across all its length, so much breaks as soon as he pinches it. So he tosses it to the floor and snaps a bite off the butter cookies that Miss Carol left her instead– that’s not fair, Meili wanted to eat them with Big Sis first–!

She pouts. And anyway, Elsa got that thread for her agees ago, it’s not like it’s garbage just because it’s a bit old, and the color is still pretty. “Maybe Big Brother should have gotten some better thread, since he was out already.”

“Too busy getting stabbed into that fucking alley. Do you even know how many times I had to go through it? Eighty-nine fucking times. That bitch."

Meili rolls her eyes. Big Brother doesn’t make sense, and Big Sis says his brain is d-a-m-a-g-e-d, but also that he cannot hold a sword for two minutes and to tell Lowenchen to eat him if he turns out too boring or doesn’t make any nice doll. "Maybe Big Brother shouldn’t have gone into that alley?"

“Yeah, because I haven’t thought of it. That fucking time loo–” His mouth freezes half-open, and Mama would have already told him to close it before she’d turn him from a worthless meatbag into a mouthless river slug. Meili squints. Huh– doesn’t the shadows around Big Bro look a bit different?

All of a sudden, his hand shoots to hold his throat and he wheezes, short of breath.

Big Bro is sooo weird.

“—it might not be my place to judge, since the Council came to a decision. Nonetheless—”

As Reinhard Julius' voice cracks up and he coughs, his hands lift into a placating gesture. When Reinhard told his friend to scream his name if he needed help, he hadn’t expected the council would order him to scream his name for days until he returned. Julius lifts the mug to his lips. Sage, lemon, honey— their scent sticks to Reinhard’s throat, overpowering yet not unpleasantly so. He is quite sure that Carol used to drink this type of tea as well, when he was a child. Alas, even though this pub serves Julius’ favorite fortified wine, he cannot partake due to his throat’s condition.

“—Dame Elsa and Sir Subaru’s… methods… are peculiar, and perhaps the Royal Knight Order isn’t the best fit for them. I solely wish for you to give it some thought before you submit the final report to Captain Gildark.”

Reinhard blinks. “I do not understand.”

“You mentioned they killed the Archbishop of Wrath with a *falconet* .”

Reinhard nods. It was a most logical choice— they were on the move and a bigger cannon couldn’t be carried across irregular terrain, so Subaru had to compromise between output and portability. Besides, his mana wouldn’t have been enough to recharge anything more powerful than that. “It was very efficient. An instakill.”

Reinhard pauses and smiles. It’s Subaru that taught him how to use that word.

Julius’ eyebrows draw together as he pinches the bridge of his nose— he’s been doing this far too many times to count while they talked, of late, and it worries Reinhard. Frequent migraines should not be within the list of symptoms caused by prolonged screaming, but perhaps his friend had been more concerned that he let on and this is due to stress. A few reassurances wouldn’t be amiss in that case.

His friend is so honorable.

“Elsa and Meili were completely unarmed as well.”

Julius opens his mouth, closes it again. He takes a deep breath. “—by your report, the falconet aimed in Dame Elsa’s direction when it fired. How would Sir Subaru know the Archbishop was there?”

Reinhard furrowed his brow. “Indeed, I am not certain. He seemed just as surprised as the rest of us. Nonetheless, Subaru often displays knowledge about unforeseen events—”

“Right.”

“—and Elsa sidestepped at the opportune moment to avoid both the Archbishop and the hit. Surely it cannot be a coincidence.”

Julius’ features in a way that indicates he’s quite pained. The throat must be bothering him far more than expected. “Even so— what about the others?”

Reinhard tilts his head. “Others?”

“The Archbishop of Sloth— he’s been a danger for the villages for as long as the Kingdom has memory, and you said Dame Elsa killed him while weaponless.”

“You misunderstand— Elsa was armed when she faced the Archbishop.”

Julius’ shoulders uncoil at the words. “I see. That would make most sen—”

“Subaru gave her a toothpick before the fight, so that’s what she stabbed Sloth with.”

By the time her blows stopped, there hadn’t been much left of the body to present as proof of death to the Council— nor a single intact page of the Archbishop’s Gospel remained either, so Reinhard could only deliver three blood-soaked paper fragments.

Even with his numerous Blessings, he still isn’t quite certain one of them was not cartilage. Subaru found that so amusing he laughed for over twenty minutes.

“—Reinhard, a toothpick cannot be considered a weapon.”

“It cannot?”

Certainly it is quite unusual, but he made do with just as little in the past, and it went quite well— like swords, toothpicks have a pointed end, and they possess the same regrettable tendency to shatter once Reinhard lands a single hit. Since the drawbacks are the same, they should have to be considered an acceptable improvised weapon for the common person.

Subaru slams the tray on the table. “—what the hell are you talking about, of course it can.”

Julius doesn’t reply, as he jerks back to avoid the splatter that comes with the motion. He isn’t successful. A few drops land right on his chest and stain the pristine white silk wine red. Reinhard won’t mention it, since he appears quite distressed as it is.

Julius’ lips thin to a white line. “You shouldn’t mislead Reinhard over such matters—”

“Who’s misleading who? If you don’t believe me, I can show it to you firsthand—”

Reinhard chuckles, then curls his fingers around the new mug. The chatter of the pub is soothing rather than a nuisance when he’s off-duty and allows it to wash over him instead of picking out bits of conversation, and this is the first time he could organize an outing with both of them. His chest grows warm with fondness.

He is so lucky to have such high-spirited friends.

“Are you making fun of me—?” Subaru flushes bright red and scowls, but his expression clears right after. “Whatever, just drink the stupid things, I’m not paying a second time— and why do I gotta pay in the first place, you two are filthy rich.”

“I am quite certain you receive a stipend from the Kingdom now, thus—”

“Subaru lost a bet.” Reinhard nods. “Nonetheless, you shouldn’t pay if you aren’t comfortable with it.”

“You, shut the fuck up,” He points at Julius, the frown back on his face. “And you, do you think I can’t handle it—?”

Reinhard smiles and doesn’t say anything— as he started to understand Subaru better as they became friends, so it became clear that regardless of the boisterous mannerism, he is quite shy and often requires some encouragement.

Meeting new people might have pushed him to act snappier than usual, but Subaru doesn’t truly mean it, he only needs to get used to it.

“It’s unbecoming of a knight to speak like–” But Julius’ voice breaks into a cough midway, and he reaches for his mug with a pinched expression instead of finishing his words.

“Didn’t quite get what the fuck you said. Mind repeating that?”

Julius takes a deep breath. Reinhard can see his chest rise and fall in a slow, controlled motion, so Reinhard knows. Then he takes another, and his hand tightens around his drink with a hiss that nobody but himself can hear. Perhaps meeting up in such a crowded place hasn’t been the best for Julius’ health.

As Julius raises the mug to his lips once again, Subaru’s gleeful smirk grows, eyes intent and sharp in a way that Reinhard hasn’t seen in a while— thinking back on it, the last time he’s seen this expression must have been right when Subaru tried out the cannon for the first time. Despite his worry for Julius, Reinhard feels his own mouth twitch with the urge to smile. Subaru had been so delighted at the mana output, it’s difficult to not feel the second hand joy from it.

Right before Julius attempts to speak again, a crash comes from two tables behind them.

Someone slips sideways and the chair topples with him— his long brown hair covers his face, but by the height, it would seem like a child— no, a teen. Silence falls, and he dips his head downward. Even without approaching, his Blessing detects the change— the moment life fades from the body. Whoever the boy is, he is dead.

Reinhard stands to his feet. He should ascertain his identity, to return the body to his family.

Before anyone can speak, Subaru leans forward until his forehead thumps against the table, bracketed by his arms, and groans. “Oh, come on—! Not again.”

He kneels next to the body and turns it over.

“Does anybody recognize him? What happened?”

It’s the bartender who approaches, eyes wide and terrified at the sight of Reinhard’s uniform— and of the sword strapped to his hip.

“Sir— Sir Sword Sait, I, I don’t know— your friend,” The man swallows as he frowns, so Reinhard relaxes his features. He’s been with Elsa, Subaru and Meili long enough that he forgot that common citizens find him intimidating. “Yer friend picked the wrong drinks, the boy’s drink should haft gone to yer table, ‘n this happen’d— but I haven’t got anything to do with it, I swear—!”

Reinhard glances at the corpse. An assassination attempt— but who could be the target? They’re outing has been unplanned in general, and they only picked the pub at the last minute— though they have been to this place often enough that it could just be luck, if any of them were the target. It wouldn’t be the first time that someone tried to attack Reinhard indirectly, thinking it easier than an open confrontation.

Julius, now besides him, stills in surprise. “That’s— that would have been for me. But—”

Reinhard inhales, and now he indeed can tell that the same scent of sage and honey masks the moonflower’s, and it lingers strong where the drink spilled. Julius’ spirits might have helped, but if Julius drank it, it would still have been quite painful. “If Subaru hasn’t switched the drinks—”

Julius turns. “Subaru— you saved me?”

Reinhard’s beams at them. He knew Subaru would warm up to him.

Subaru doesn’t lift his head, so his words end up muffled. "Fuck this fucking bullshit—! I knew I should have used the cat boy instead."

Julius' eyebrows furrow in confusion, but he still dips his head in a bow. "I am indebted to you now Natsuki Subaru, and if you allow it, I woul—"

The door splinters into pieces as soon as Julius stops speaking. A feeling that they should probably avoid this establishment in the future settles in his mind— the whole dead body matter is of course unpleasant, but still forgivable; Reinhard doesn't think the owner of the pub will be as indulgent with them with the property damage— the lower districts are a harsh environment.

Miss Shaula squints at them from the doorway, fiddling with the hem of her maid dress. Her nose quivers for a moment as she breathes in the smells of the room, then her whole face brightens with a smile. "Ma~aster, I found you!"

"Shaula, the fucking door– I can't pay for it, I'm broke—" Subaru gasps as she clutches his torso into a hug, and his face colors to a worrisome, patchy shade of crimson. His next words are nothing more than a wheeze. "Oof. That hurts, you moron–!"

Perhaps Reinhard should intervene. Subaru is quite delicate.

Before he can act, Julius rests a hand on his forearm. His features, Reinhard feels, should not dull to such a bleak, exhausted look— somewhat, it goes beyond the stress and reminds Reinhard of the looks Carol has been giving him as well, of late. "Who is that?"

Reinhard smiles, relieved. Of course, Julius must be worried over his savior and friend, that is why his demeanor darkened so much. "That's Miss Shaula. She's—"

Subaru leverages himself out of her arms and scowls. "She's a pain in my ass—"

"—Subaru's maid—"

"—that's what she is—"

"—They reunited on our trip to the Augria Dunes. It's a remarkable coincidence that the—"

"—but at least something good came out of that stupid—"

"—bet we made could allow them to meet in—"

"—fucking place. What kind of bastard *hides* a *tower* in Flat-Earth Desert—!"

"—such unusual circumstances."

They fall silent together right as the chatter from other customers resumes, one shy word at a time— Reinhard could swear people look in their direction, since his Blessings respond to other people's eyes, but when he glances around, he finds that the people closest to them direct their gaze out of the broken door. This happens quite often, truth to be told, but it's still one social norm that Reinhard doesn't understand at all— he should ask Julius to explain it to him, at some point.

Miss Shaula beams at him. Her focus doesn't quite make it to Julius' face, and fixes halfway between his chin and nose instead. "I'm Shaula, Master's cute assistant–!"

Julius winces. "—Right. I'm certain I shall regret this, but what was the bet?"

"Subaru wanted to see if my sword could reflect back Miss Shaula's sniping."

Subaru glowers. "Stupid glorified stick can't be taken out of the scabbard but it still fucks everything up—"

Reinhard nods. The Dragon Sword's limitations are rather inconvenient. "Her skills with long-range combat would be an asset to any woman with her position, but I deflected them easily with the Dragon Sword."

"–Her position as a maid?"

"Well, yeah." Subaru mushes his cheek against his hand and grins.

"I— I don't believe that such a skill is a requirement for housework."

Reinhard hums. That couldn't be correct— Carol and Grimm mentioned that they taught their nieces all the traditional martial arts so they could be worthy as servants in Astrea Manor, and Elsa, too, mentioned that in Gusteko servants of the Spirit Knights are formidable. Perhaps Julius would have benefitted from better vetting for his household staff. Reinhard shall inquire with Carol later for the best way to approach the topic— it would do no good to leave his friend in a vulnerable position.

"Nonetheless, that's how we met. After we destroyed the tower–"

"You're not supposed to say th–" The moment that Subaru kicks him under the table, he folds into himself and slaps a hand on his mouth to muffle the pained whimper– this isn't the first time, but Reinhard still winces in sympathy. No matter how many reminders that it will result in Subaru breaking his foot, he keeps forgetting. Reinhard needs to make a better effort so that Subaru won't harm himself as often. "– *fuck* . You idiot. Are you made of steel or what–!"

"The… the Watchtower in the Augria desert–?"

Reinhard glances to the side. As they talk, Miss Shaula crouches next to the body and sniffs the air, then nudges the corpse's shoulder with her index finger with enough strength that it jolts and the head turns. Just like that, a black book tilts out of a pocket and lands at her feet.

"Eh~ Doesn't this person smell a bit like Master?"

"Words can't represent what today's discovery means for Lugunica." Meili nods, but doesn't bother to raise her eyes from the mess of needles and threads in front of her. Sewing got easier with time, but it still needed her undivided attention. She doesn't want to ruin her latest doll when she is a few stitches away from finishing it. "The mission was a success. Your doll has allowed us to find the fourth and final Dragon Maiden. The Royal Election can finally start."

"—Fourth?" The needle slips from her fingers. Meili might not be great at writing yet, but she knows how to count, and there are five candidates. This new lady, winter witch lady, greedy purple lady, Mister's grandpa's lady, and the orange lady that absolutely has smaller breasts than Elsa.

Mister nods. His smile is unlike any Meili has seen up to now– Mister is really happy this time, doesn't look gloomy at all anymore. "Yes, with Lady Felt, there are four candidates."

Meili gasps, eyes widening. Surely, it couldn't mean what she thought it meant. "Riiiight, *four* . Because there is no green haired Lady joining, isn't there?"

Mister blinks, and his face settles into the same fake, innocent face Lowenchen does when he eats things he shouldn't. "…There is no green haired Lady joining, no. The new Lady is golden haired, just like every other member of the Lugunican Royal Family."

If there was no green haired Royal Candidate, it could only mean one thing.

"I'm so proud of Mister!" Meili squeals, a huge smile blossoming across her face. Mister had finally realized his grandfather was the root of all his problems and got revenge by killing both him and the Lady he served. Mister is *ruthless* . Meili is so happy for him–!

—A blasting sound crushes her eardrums as the living room's door is turned into splinters by Big Brother Subaru's falconet.

"Fuck it! How is this fair?!" Big Brother Subaru curses, still carrying his cannon. Meili covers her ears. Firing that thing inside a closed space made enough noise to wake up the *dead* . "Why does he get to kill the people he wants and I can't?! This isn't my isekai fantasy at all!"

"Elsa says that it's because you don't aim for the bowels." Meili narrows her eyes, ears still ringing from the blast. She likes Older Brother— he helps her sewing her dolls and spends lots of looooots of time with Elsa trying to come up with ways to kill borderline immortal enemies, but he still is only a rookie.

"What–? Of course I tried that too, what do you mean–" Big Brother's voice is almost as loud as the stupid cannon, so– Wait. The dolls he's holding, with both his hands clenched around the neck, isn't it—

—Her eyes widen. That’s her Elsa Plush!

“Maaaaster~ I can help you with murder too if you need,” Shaula sings, and tackles Older Brother from behind. Both of them fall to the floor, but Meili sighs in relief, because Mister saves the Elsa Plush at the last moment. He plucks her right off Brother’s fingers the moment his grip slackens.

Shaula pouts “Pretty please with a cherry on top~?”

Big Brother blushes and rubs his neck. “Agh—! Fine, okay. Thank you.”

Older Brother’s relationship with his maid is weird. Meili still can’t understand it. She calls him Master— but never makes him food, cleans after him or serves him at all. She just hugs him and sleeps with him. Sister says she will understand when she is older, but Meili asked Mister too and he also seemed to find it strange.

“What— what is going on here?” A soft spoken voice Meili had never heard before interrupts, making Mister, Brother, his maid all turn towards her. “I just heard a blast?”

Meili’s lips part in a perfectly round ‘o’. Lowering her gaze, she stares at the button-eyes of the blond haired doll she just finished sewing, seconds before Subaru blasted the manor’s entrance door open. The face was much softer looking than it originally was.

Reinhard’s choked cry of “Mother?” is smothered by Subaru’s loud: “Oh c’mon, not again!”

Meili traces the stitches on the doll’s head before nodding. This is it, the plush is almost done. Her straight pale platinum hair is firmly attached, just like her ugly, plain looking dress. She finds it weird that Mama would follow a person with such a terrible taste in clothes, but Elsa insists the head of the Witch Cult looks exactly like that, and Elsa is always right.

The world surrounding Meili fades as she finishes the final details. Picking the blue ribbon from her sewing kit, she adds it to the plush’s head and… the doll’s face magically transforms from inexpressive to unnaturally dreamy.

It worked.

“...Done,” Meili breathes.

—And watches as the stitching and stuffing all comes out the moment Elsa sinks her knife in and cuts across the front.

“—Are they *truly* the best team we can send to Vollachia?" Marcos asks before turning towards him again.

"Of course they aren’t," Miklotov scoffs. Reinhard’s group of strays were the worst possible team you could send to an Empire currently undergoing a civil war. Subaru Natsuki believed bringing cannons with him was a good idea, and his maid carried a three meters tall *trebuchet* from all things. Elsa and her little sister were still wanted in four different *Kingdoms* . "But I'd rather have them destroy Vollachia than Lugunica."

They had already accidentality burned down half of Mathers domain and caused the marquis to have a mental breakdown so big he still couldn’t mutter anything other than *‘Master… they burnt it. They burnt you’.* Whatever that meant.

Marcos rubs his chin. "But sending Sir Julius too is..."

"A dangerous gamble, I know, but we can’t leave Sir Subaru and Dame Elsa alone, they need a babysitter."

"Pff," Bordeaux, who had remained silent until then, rolls his eyes. "More like a sacrifice."

Sir Julius stands separated from the rest, looking visibly uncomfortable as the creepy little girl the Sword Saint stole from Gusteko— Meili, Miklotov thinks her name is— continues blabbering non-stop next to him. And well, Bordeaux isn’t completely wrong. Sir Julius will be sorely missed, but ever since Louanna Astrea woke up, Heinkel actually started doing his job. Sir Julius was no longer indispensable.

"—And you will finally get to meet Lowenchen! He is a lot like you, you both have preeeeetty purple hair, yellow eyes and can kill people legally!"

At the little girl’s words, Shaula’s face shifts into what Miklotov would have called a thoughtful expression, if he hadn't already realized rational thought is beyond her capabilities. "Lowe... Lowe..n...chen..." She tests the words in her mouth. "Is that German?"

Meili blinks at her, mirroring the confusion Miklotov himself feels whenever she speaks. "What is *jeru-manu* ?"

"Huh..." Shaula pouts for a second before ultimately shrugging. "I don't know, Master just said that because of them a silly mustache style was banned."

“That’s it,” Bordeaux coughs. “At least if this mission fails as magisterially as I expect it to fail, Vollachia will be too destroyed to start an actual war with us."

Miklotov nods. "May the Divine Dragon protect Vollachia," he whispers. "Od Laguna knows they will need him."